

When Muslims talk to Zionists

“It’s one thing to say you support a two-state solution. It’s another thing to go to Israel and study Judaism.”

[David Heim](#) interviews Abdullah Antepi in the [February 15, 2017](#) issue



Abdullah Antepli. © Duke Photography.

Imam Abdullah Antepli grew up in southeastern Turkey and moved to the United States in 2003 to study at Hartford Seminary. He became the Muslim chaplain at Wesleyan University and in 2008 was named Muslim chaplain at Duke University, where he is now director of the university's Center for Muslim Life and teaches at Duke Divinity School. He is founder and board member of the Association of College Muslim Chaplains. Since 2013 Antepli has been codirector of the Muslim Leadership

Initiative at the Shalom Hartman Institute, a program that brings North American Muslim leaders to Jerusalem to study with Jewish scholars, focusing on the history of Israel and Judaism and issues facing the people of Israel and Palestine.

What launched you on your path toward seeking interfaith understanding?

The Turkey I grew up in had attempted to create a mono-religious and mono-ideological society, but many in my generation, which grew up in the 1980s, rebelled against the forced homogeneity. Personally I always found similarities boring and cross-religious, cross-cultural, cross-racial conversations incredibly enlightening. Those who were different from me were like a mirror in which I could see myself. There is something innate in me that is attracted to things that are different from myself.

Did you have opportunities while growing up to meet people who were culturally or religiously different?

My first introduction was through history books. In middle school I found out that before 1913 one-third of the town that I grew up in was Armenian and that it once had 17 Armenian churches. None survived the genocide. And there was some nostalgia for the time of the Ottoman Empire when Christians, Muslims, and Jews lived together in harmony. I went out of my way to connect with the small numbers of Jews and Christians that remained in Turkey. During high school I visited Greece for the first time. I had an unstoppable desire to get out of Turkey and explore the world.

My real introduction to living, practicing Western Christians and Jews came when I was a humanitarian worker for eight years in Southeast Asia. I worked in Malaysia and Myanmar setting up orphanages and schools for youths who were at high risk of being sold as sex slaves. Most of my colleagues were Christian missionaries.

That was my real introduction to Christians who take their love of God and manifest it in service to humanity. Sometimes I had difficulty understanding their motivation, and sometimes I felt their service was conditional on converting people to their own faith. But I always loved their service to humanity.

There seems to be a strong strain of anti-Judaism and anti-Zionism in many streams of Islam. Where does that come from?

Islam has its own theological, scriptural, and doctrinal anti-Semitism, but it is very different from Christian anti-Semitism. Because of Judaism's unique relationship to Christianity, the way the church evolved, and the heated debates about who Jesus is, anti-Semitism very quickly moved into the heart of Christianity. The very symbol of Christianity, the cross, has pumped anti-Semitism into Christianity in subtle and unsubtle ways. The central story of Christianity can be distorted in an anti-Semitic direction.

Islam has not had anti-Semitism at its heart in that way. But unfortunately a kind of anti-Semitism has moved into Islam, and I was a victim of it. I grew up staunchly anti-Semitic.

The first book I read about Jews was a children's version of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The second book was Henry Ford's *The International Jew*. The third was *Mein Kampf*. These were my introductions to Judaism.

My journey is representative of the modern Islamic turn toward anti-Semitism, because what made me an anti-Semite was not my religion but the socioeconomic and geopolitical context. Muslim anti-Semitism is mostly a post-1948 phenomenon: it arose because of how the Muslim world experienced and perceived the creation of the state of Israel. Israel was seen as the result of a colonial land grab by Western Judeo-Christian civilization. Over time, this political anti-Semitism gained religious legitimacy and endorsement.

A hundred years ago, if you had shown any Muslim the charter of Hamas—which is horrifically anti-Semitic—they would have laughed at it. They would never have considered anti-Semitism a major part of Muslim theology. Muslims have rewritten their understanding of scripture and theology in anti-Semitic fashion.

How do you try to combat that?

It will require a different strategy from the one Christians used to combat Christian anti-Semitism. It is remarkable and admirable the extent to which Christian anti-Semitism has been defeated in the West. The Catholic and the Protestant churches revised their religious imagination and eliminated anti-Semitic elements from their books, teachings, and lexicon. Most of this effort was a response to the Holocaust. How much would have happened without that? I hope Muslims will be able to defeat anti-Semitism in Islam without waiting to see the worst of what it can do.

We must fight Islamic anti-Semitism on religious grounds, but socioeconomic and political anti-Semitism needs to be addressed on its own grounds. Palestinian suffering matters. Achieving a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would make a huge contribution—though that solution is very unlikely. In the absence of that, the Muslim and Jewish communities have to work hard to make sure that the conflict in the Middle East doesn't continue to push Muslims toward hatred for Jews and Judaism.

You've mentioned how central the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is. How can Christians, Muslims, and Jews in the West be constructive in addressing this seemingly intractable conflict?

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is like a bitter divorce case. When a couple after 20 years of marriage goes through a bitter divorce, they bring up all the negative memories they have about each other and they rewrite the history of the relationship. All they can remember is the horrible stuff that they said and did to each other. In order to get out of this vicious cycle, we have to try to create some empathy toward the other.

"When people criticize me for talking to Zionists, I say: What's your alternative?"

That's what I'm trying to do with the Muslim Leadership Initiative. Can we Muslims learn to see the world through the eyes of Jews? Can we show that we are capable of walking in their shoes and at least create a respectful language by which we can speak and hear each other? Can we see each other as something other than an existential threat?

There are two different extremes in the conversation over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There is one set of conversations that deliberately ignores the conflict—the conflict is the elephant in the room. Often these groups talk about how Islam is a religion of peace, Judaism is a religion of love and grace, and Christianity is a religion of love. At best these conversations are a waste of time and at worst they only empower violent elements by showing that conversation is unproductive. The other extreme is when people with deeply entrenched political views come together to try to show that the other side is wrong.

There must be a way we can explore our similarities, hear about the other's fears, speak about our political differences, and go beyond these disagreements to see what is the greater good.

You've been criticized specifically for your work with the Muslim Leadership Initiative by people on the Palestinian side who see studying with Zionist Jews in Israel as an act of so-called normalizing relations with Israel. How do you respond?

Many of these criticisms are ill-informed. They are knee-jerk reactions to social media by people who don't know what MLI is and who is involved. All they hear is that Muslims are schmoozing with Zionist Jews. I try to explain what the program is and who is involved and the background and track record of the American Muslims involved.

If people are condemning me just for engaging with Zionist Jews—if they are saying no to a handshake with Jews, no to a conversation with Jews—then there's really not much I can say in response. But if someone is criticizing me for the way I engage with Jews, then we can have a conversation.

I define my life as an experiment. Many attempts have been made in the past 20 years to bridge the divide between Jews and Muslims, but the two communities are far more polarized than ever. So there's room for trying a new experiment. If you don't like how I do it, give me an alternative. Tell me a better way to do it.

Can you say what Muslim participants in the MLI program get out of the program? What kinds of things are learned?

Everyone's experience is unique, but there are some common threads. The program shows that human interaction is a key to undermining stereotypes about the other. Through human interaction you can disarm people and find how much you share with someone, despite political disagreement. A little bit of an education about the other, a modest attempt at seeing the world the way that someone else experiences it—that goes a long way.

People also see the power of an act of good will. The overwhelming majority of Muslim Americans support a two-state solution in Israel/Palestine. But it is one thing to say that and another thing actually to go to Israel and study Judaism. It is putting your money where your mouth is, proving your sincerity in seeking a solution. It's incredible how much good will is created in the Jewish community by such an act.

A strategy I would like to explore is getting Jews, Christians, and Muslims together to do things, not just say things—to give examples of working together. That will

indirectly solve the many problems we are trying to tackle.

What is the biggest misunderstanding about Islam that you encounter?

That's a very painful subject to speak about so soon after the presidential election. Just as many Muslims see Jews and Zionism as a monolithic reality, many people in American society see Islam as a monolithic reality. They believe all Muslims are terrorists, that Islam is evil. The simplistic and hateful rhetoric has been repeated enough times that many Americans have swallowed this propaganda.

Whatever we have been doing about this since 9/11—and Muslim Americans have done a huge amount to address this misperception—is not working for certain segments of American society. We need some new strategies. Muslims can spend 20 hours a day condemning terrorism and saying it does not represent Islam, and it won't matter as long as the majority of the society can't hear or is not willing to listen.

It's important that faith communities, civic organizations, and political parties respond to the rise of hate. People are fooling themselves if they think bigotry will be confined to Muslims or that it is Muslims' responsibility alone to respond to it. The cancer spreads if it goes unchallenged. If bigotry against Muslims grows any further, it can ruin the foundation of the United States as a multicultural, multireligious society.

What sustains you day-to-day in this work? Where you get your inspiration?

As an American Muslim, I have a million reasons to feel discouraged. But one of the central teachings of Islam is that losing hope is equivalent to denying the existence of God. Despair is unbelief. What sustains me is an unshakeable belief in the God who is involved in every aspect of history.

When I see how Jewish-Christian reality changed from the time of the Holocaust to having a Jewish presidential candidate in the United States in 2016—and his Jewish identity is not even talked about—and when I see the relative success in eliminating homophobia, racism, sexism, and misogyny, I believe we have come a long way. By no means are these complete victories. But I see God's fingerprints in the relative successes of the struggles of the past. So I have absolute confidence that the God of love and mercy and compassion will work through humanity and we shall overcome

this bigotry.

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